

Advent a Season of Preparation

If you missed last week, here's a brief recap: Advent is the season of the Christian year when we prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. It's a time when we put up our Christmas decorations and sing Advent hymns and Christmas carols and relive the story of His birth in Bethlehem. But that's only one way to celebrate Advent. We also look for His second coming. And, as we heard last Sunday, there are a lot of Scriptures that tell of a day of judgment when Christ will come back to earth to reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

For us, that'll be a good day, for sure! And then there are the passages for today. They aren't about the birth of Jesus, or of His imminent return. They fit into a different category. The first one we heard, from the prophet Malachi, talks about a messenger preparing the way before the Lord. Our Gospel lesson focuses on this person, who came before the Lord, to prepare the way. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 3:1-6. **Read Luke 3:1-6.**

Our Gospel lesson today focuses, in an odd way, on the here and now. See, we hear about John the Baptist, who came on the scene just a little ahead of Jesus. John's out in the wilderness preaching Good News – the long-awaited Messiah is coming! See, the people knew all these promises from Scripture, that a Savior would come – but He hadn't arrived yet in their minds. So, they were watching and waiting.

We have all these great promises from the Scriptures. A promise that a Savior came, and that He could come again and make things right. So, we are watching and waiting today. That's the main point I was trying to get at last week – we have to proclaim the Gospel story in all three verses – past, present, and future tense. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we affirm the “mystery of our faith: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.”

The Gospel, A Historical Account

Luke records some important information to place the events of his Gospel account into the historic record. He writes:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness, (Luke 3:1-2).

I want to run through a couple dates and then see if you know what's significant about them. Here we go: July 4, 1776; April 14, 1865; October 29, 1929; December 7,

1941; November 22, 1963; September 11, 2001. Each date points to a specific time in which something historic took place: the signing of the Declaration of Independence; the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln; the stock market crash which triggered the Great Depression; the bombing of Pearl Harbor; the assassination of President Kennedy; the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In the same way, Luke wants us to understand that the events pointing to Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection came at a specific period of time. "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar..." This is important, because it makes it crystal clear that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not a fairy tale, a myth, or a legend.

To put it another way, he didn't write, "Once upon a time," or something to that effect. He pinpoints the exact moment when it happens by listing all these various office holders of the time period. It would be like us dating things in years since the Declaration of Independence, and in terms of Presidential office holders. It may sound something like, "In the 248th year of US independence, during the 4th year of Biden's term as President, and in the second year of DeWine's second term as Governor of Ohio, the men had a breakfast at New Hope on the first Saturday of Advent."

The Gospel is a historic fact. Jesus came, lived a perfect life, died on the cross for us, and He rose from the dead three days later. And John the Baptist prepares the way for Him to begin His public ministry. When you hear the call of God – John did, we're told here "in the wilderness," it changes you. It excites you. Experiencing Someone bigger than ourselves is captivating and breath-taking. And – it's unlikely. We never expect to hear a word or a call from God.

Unlikely People, Unlikely Places

And so, it happens for John in the unlikeliest of places – while he's out in the wilderness. Most of us have grown up in the Church. We just assume that we'd hear God calling us through the Church. John, we would think, should have heard God's word while in the temple. It seems like a natural place to hear it.

Instead, he hears it in the Judean wilderness. I've never been to the Holy land, but would like to go there someday, to be able to walk where Jesus walked. To see the places where the stories in the Bible actually happened. The Judean wilderness has nothing but rocks, sand, and little bushes. It's a desert – without cactuses.

God often appears in the most unlikely places, and – especially in this day and age – we need to be careful not to get locked into thinking that God only appears in predictable ways. Anyhow, the word of God comes to John in the wilderness. John, of course, is an unlikely choice to be God's messenger. Mark's Gospel has an account of what he looked like. Mark says, "John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey," (Mark 1:6).

Just picture that for a moment. The description makes me think of a caveman type of person. Like the old cartoon, “Captain Caveman,” a wild looking sort of guy who looks more like an animal than a human being. And let’s be honest – eating bugs and wild honey – his teeth were probably shot, and his breath probably reeked. He’s not a person most sensible folks would really want to get too close to, or actively pal around with.

Passionate Preaching

Despite his appearance, notice what John does. “He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” (Luke 3:3). Why would John do this? Why bother preaching repentance, and calling for people to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins?

We already know this – John the Baptist was a relative of Jesus. Mary and Elizabeth were cousins. So why would John want people to be baptized and repent from their sins? Because he knows the Truth. John knows the Word made flesh, who dwelt among us. John had a life-changing encounter in hearing the word of God.

So, he goes out, “into all the country around the Jordan,” trying to get people to repent, and to seek forgiveness for their sins. According to Google, the Jordan River is 223 miles long. That’s a lot of miles for a guy to put on the old Cadillac! Because it meanders around and stuff the actual distance from its beginning to the Dead Sea where it ends is about 124 miles. That’s still a long way to walk on foot, through mountainous and dangerous land.

It would be hard work. But he does it anyways. Why? Because for John, it’s an act of worship. And his worship isn’t just sitting and listening to Annas or Caiaphas the priests speak nice fancy messages – John’s worship is active. It’s passionate. It’s all-consuming.

John: A Messenger from God

See, at this point in history John is the main messenger from God. And God is always trying to draw people into closer relationship with Him. So, He’s calling people, through John, to be baptized, to ask for forgiveness from sin. What Luke gives us next is a quote from Isaiah, and a snippet of a verse we heard earlier from Malachi. He says:

As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation,’” (Luke 3:4-6).

There’s a lot for us to unpack from all this today. Sometimes, we may feel like we are spiritually “in the wilderness” – disconnected, wandering, overwhelmed. But in most cases, those moments prepare us for greater intimacy with God. On this second

Sunday of Advent, are you feeling overwhelmed, or disconnected? Maybe God's trying to get your attention and draw you into deeper relationship with Himself.

John's call, the quote from Isaiah, calls us to make a similar effort in our lives. We must remove whatever barriers – we have to straighten out whatever crooked roads – we've put up that prevent us from fully embracing Jesus Christ and responding to Him. What are the "crooked roads" in our lives? Is it a broken relationship, unrepentant sin, or misplaced priorities? Passion for Jesus, and passionate worship of Jesus, begins with a willingness to let Him transform us.

Worshiping Passionately

Our Gospel lesson closes with John's statement that "All people will see God's salvation." That's an inclusive message. It is applicable to the entire human race. Salvation isn't limited by ethnicity, status, or even past mistakes. Passion for Jesus transcends boundaries. When we begin to grasp the depths of His love, we ought to want to share it with others. It's like the old song, "Pass It On." "I wish for you my friend, This happiness that I've found, You can depend on Him, It matters not where you're bound. I'll shout it from the mountain top, I want my world to know, the Lord of love has come to me, I want to pass it on."

We should naturally want to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with other people who do not yet know Him and point others in His direction. Passion for Jesus compels us to shine His light into a world darkened by death and sin and desperately aching for the hope which we have! The call to "prepare the way of the Lord" is as urgent today as it was in Isaiah's time, and in John the Baptist's time. As we respond to the call, we mustn't be afraid to let our passion for Jesus Christ burn brightly to draw others to Him.

And sometimes, that requires great sacrifice on our part. John the Baptist's story is not one with a happy ending. He called out the immorality he saw occurring in the highest officers of the land and was beheaded for it. But in the end, John the Baptist remained true to the call he heard from God. He kept that flame of passion for God's word burning. He stayed faithful to the teachings and principles of the Living Truth, Jesus Christ. His passionate worship, the call to baptism and repentance contained in the Gospels, has resulted in the Church remembering and celebrating Baptism as a sacrament for the last 2,000 years. All in all, I'd say the quirky guy enrobed in camel's fur left quite the impact on Christianity, wouldn't you?

Prayer: God of grace, You blow the breath of life into our lungs and have formed us in Your image. Yet we sometimes are not who You would have us be. You challenge us to embrace the refining fire of Your love, to meet you on the threshing floor of life, and be washed clean. But in our heart of hearts, we would rather keep those things that would be removed in such an encounter. Accept us as we are, life-giving God; unrefined, unwashed, and help us to move into a new way of being. Embrace us as we are, where we are, and draw us out to be the people You created us to be, to do the works You prepared in advance for us to do, all for Your glory. Amen.